Mexicans Raise Questions on Hughes' Death

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ACAPULCO, Mexico, April 15—Mexican authorities investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of Howard Hughes have raised the question of whether the billionaire was alive or dead when he was taken from Mexico 10 days ago.

A 103-page report including testimony taken by the Mexican attorney general's office cites a Mexican doctor's judgment that Hughes "had only three or four more hours to live" as of 6 a.m. April 5 and the fact that Hughes' plane did not leave Acapulco for another six hours.

The report does not offer any direct evidence, however, to refute Hughes' doctors' statement that the rich recluse died another hour and a half later, in U.S. airspace, while being flown to a Houston hospital.

The pilot and copilot of the plane that brought Hughes from Mexico—both of whom had flown charters for Hughes' financial empire before—said after landing in this country that the patient loaded on the plane had shown signs of life, such as moving his lips.

Unfamiliar with Hughes' secretive way of life, Mexican authorities cited as suspicious several circumstances surrounding his entourage's stay in Mexico:

• Police who searched the Hughes quarters in a luxury hotel here say they were unable to detect a single fingerprint on Hughes' wheelchair or bed, on furniture, doors, typewriters or any of the other office or medical equipment left behind.

• Also, they said, enormous amounts of papers were found to have been shredded and left behind in three plastic trash bags.

• The windows of the room in which the ailing Hughes had stayed were found boarded up.

• Investigators quote a Hughes' aide as saying during questioning that Hughes was supposed to sign "very important papers" on Saturday, two days before his death, but that he could not do so because he did not regain consciousness. The investigators speculate that the "papers" might have been a new will or codicils to an existing will.

• Several documents relating to the entry into Mexico of the nine-man Hughes group on Feb. 11 were discovered to be missing from Mexican government files, and the investigation indicated that the Hughes party had left Mexico without providing the medical certificate required by law for the departure of a seriously ill person.

The office of the Mexican attorney general began investigating the circumstances surrounding Huges more than a month ago, when it was discovered that, in the words of the report, he had been "virtually smuggled into the country."

The federal attorney report quotes a Hughes aide, Eric Bundy as saying that he had paid Mexican customs officials a $3,000 "gratuity" to obtain release of office and medical equipment that had been held at the airport after

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Hughes and eight aides arrived in Mexico from the Bahamas at 5 a.m.

Testimony in the report says that Hughes and his party were met by the assistant manager of the Princess Hotel, two Hughes advance men and—to the surprise of police officials—the two top local immigration officials, who had been summoned to the airport "to receive distinguished hotel guests."

The report says that the group left the airport without completing the usual forms for the airplane or its passengers.

The papers were completed later that morning, the report says, but the two immigration officials were not actually present when the immigration documents were signed.

Mexican officials expressed suspicion at the "isolation" of the Hughes group, and the report appears to hint at doubts that Hughes was able to function during the time.

"There is no evidence from the few people who say they saw him," it says, that Hughes "made any requests or decisions or even dealt with the smallest matter."

At other points, the report speaks of Hughes as being "kept incommunicado" and questioning whether "his physical condition" permitted him "to act according to his will."

Three Mexican police investigators expressed puzzlement as to why the Hughes group—which they said included two of his four private physicians — had called in a Mexican doctor. A third Hughes physician arrived with a suitcase full of medicine on the morning of his death, the investigators said.

"What did they need outside witnesses for?" asked a police official. "What were they trying to prove? It seems that their . . . interest was to show that Hughes was still alive . . ."

The Mexican physician, army Lt. Col. Victor Manuel Montemayor, said that a two-hour examination that he conducted showed the patient to be in critical condition, unconscious and suffering from severe dehydration, kidney failure and a number of other serious ailments.

He told the federal attorney that he had expressed surprise to Hughes' doctors at the patient's physical condition. One of them replied, Montemayor said, that Hughes was a difficult man who resisted medical treatment.

Montemayor said he asked how this could be, if the patient had been unconscious for three days, as he was told.

He also told federal investigators that Hughes seemed to be addicted to codeine, which apparently was used mainly to deal with pain in the pelvic region.

Montemayor testified that he had told Eric Bundy—the Hughes aide the doctor says he took to be in charge— that Hughes would need intensive care and that the case was 'a race against time."

He says that he called for larger oxygen tanks, although there were some small ones in the room, and said it was obvious to him that Hughes' staff expected their boss to die soon.

This situation led the Mexican police to express puzzlement over why it was another four hours before Hughes was flown out of Mexico aboard the private ambulance plane that had arrived earlier that morning.

The Acapulco police say that the exact circumstances of Hughes' death may never be known, pointing out that the case is outside their jurisdiction because there is no proof that he died in Mexico.

Still, they claim, there are contradictions in the testimony of Hughes' aides, even though they made telephone calls to the United States to discuss their then-impending interrogation here:

- Although other Hughes' aides described Eric Bundy to investigators as Hughes' secretary in charge of day-to-day operations, he is quoted as denying that he had spoken to Hughes recently "because other Hughes assistants prevented him from doing so."
- Again, although the aides reportedly said that Hughes was always in the company of at least one or two assistants, police quote Clarence Waldron as saying that when Hughes "had fallen from his chair a few weeks earlier, causing the tumor on his head to open with a great loss of blood, no one saw what happened, for no one was with him at the time."

The report includes testimony by hotel and ambulance staff as well as by the Mexican doctor, immigration officials and three Hughes aides who were held for questioning in relation to possible forgery of Hughes' signature on his immigration documents. Besides Bundy and Waldron, Hughes aide Clyde Barrows-Crow was interrogated.

Mexican federal police are still holding a large amount of equipment and objects allegedly brought into the country by Hughes' Summa Corp. "without the necessary import permits," including an electrocardiograph, a photocopier, a shredding machine, several typewriters and several filing cabinets containing documents.

The three Hughes aides have all left Mexico. Waldron, who had been charged with falsifying Hughes' signature on the immigration documents, was released two days ago by a federal judge "for lack of sufficient evidence."

Sources in the Mexican attorney general's office say, however, that the case will be appealed because prosecutors feel that their evidence is sufficient to win their case.